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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 05 BISHKEK 000737

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SUBJECT: KYRGYZ PUSH FOR MILLENNIUM CHALLENGE FINANCING,
GREATER COMPENSATION FOR BASE, AND INDEPENDENT TELEVISION

REF: BISHKEK 707

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Classified By: Amb. Marie L. Yovanovitch, Reason 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: During a June 7-11 visit to Bishkek, Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asia Richard Boucher met with senior Kyrgyz government officials, parliamentary deputies, civil society representatives, and business leaders. Prime Minister Atambayev was upbeat about the bilateral relationship, urged expedited approval to fund Kyrgyzstan's Millennium Challenge Account Threshold Country Plan, and said the government would follow through on constitutional, judicial, and law enforcement reforms. Government and civil society interlocutors strongly supported moving forward as soon as possible with the Threshold Country Plan, saying they believed that the program of judicial and law enforcement reforms could be implemented successfully. Civil society and opposition leaders asked for greater U.S. support for independent television news, to counter the pro-Russian, anti-American bias of current sources. While Boucher received reassurances of the Kyrgyz government's commitment to the continued operation of the Manas Air Base, Kyrgyz officials were also looking for ways to increase economic benefits from the base. Speaker of Parliament Sultanov suggested that the presence of the base was blocking commercial development around Manas Airport. The slow resolution of incidents at the base was cited as a major challenge for the bilateral relationship.

12. (C) Assistant Secretary Boucher emphasized the importance of Kyrgyzstan's contribution to regional stability by hosting the base, and he laid out a path to improve relations over the base, including activating a joint commission to address base-related issues. Boucher highlighted Kyrgyzstan's regional role in education, and he urged greater efforts on regional economic cooperation, including establishing the right legal framework to allow electricity exports in the region and to South Asia. Boucher also said he would try to

find money to support independent television for Central Asia. End Summary.

13. (U) During his June 7-11 visit, Assistant Secretary Boucher met with Kyrgyz Prime Minister Atambayev, Foreign Minister Karabayev, Speaker of Parliament Sultanov, and Presidential Chief of Staff Sadyrkulov. He met with a group of opposition and independent deputies, as well as with deputies who have been critical of the base. Boucher met with Supreme Court Chair Osmonov, met with Drug Control Agency Director Sultanov and toured the Agency's Bishkek headquarters. Boucher had extended discussions with civil society representatives and with the American Chamber of Commerce board, and he met with leading political analysts Muratbek Imanaliyev and Valentin Bogatyrev. Boucher delivered the commencement address at the American University of Central Asia, and he held a roundtable discussion with students at the Slavonic University. The Assistant Secretary was accompanied in all meetings by Ambassador Yovanovitch and Senior Advisor Hayden. His meeting with President Bakiyev was reported reftel.

Support for Millennium Challenge

14. (C) At nearly every meeting, government and civil society interlocutors asked about the status of Kyrgyzstan's Millennium Challenge Account Threshold Country Plan. Assistant Secretary Boucher explained that the U.S. understood how important the program would be for judicial and law enforcement reform in Kyrgyzstan, and that the Millennium Challenge Corporation board would probably make a final decision on funding in the next few months. However, the Corporation had asked a number of questions about implementation: Was there sufficient political will in

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Kyrgyzstan to carry out the program? Could the program be implemented successfully amidst the recent political turmoil? Could the program's reforms be realized without changes to the constitution?

15. (C) The answer from civil society and from government was clear: the program can be implemented successfully; reform of the judiciary and law enforcement is fundamental to other reforms; and the program should be approved as soon as possible. Foreign Minister Karabayev said that judicial sector reform was essential for Kyrgyzstan's development. "If there is no change there, the other reforms won't happen," he said. Karabayev said that the government had demonstrated its commitment to the Threshold Country Plan: it had already completed nearly half of the preliminary steps, several other measures were underway, and only a shortage of funding had prevented action on the remaining items. Supreme Court Chair Osmonov told Boucher that the government wanted to create an independent judiciary, both to help attract foreign investment and to promote domestic stability. Civil society leaders Omurbek Abdurakhmanov and Asiya Sasykbayeva were emphatic that the U.S. should go forward with funding, although Sasykbayeva noted that changing the laws on the judiciary would not happen until the new constitution was adopted. Speaker of Parliament Sultanov told Boucher that judicial sector reform was proceeding adequately, though he saw a need for additional measures to maintain a balance between the judicial and executive branches.

16. (C) Prime Minister Atambayev thought that Kyrgyzstan's Millennium Challenge Account program was important both for domestic reform and for better balance in Kyrgyzstan's foreign relations. He urged Boucher to "expedite Kyrgyzstan's inclusion" in the program, preferably before the August 16 Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit in Bishkek. He said that the Threshold Country program would strengthen the U.S. position in Kyrgyzstan, which was important as Kyrgyzstan tried to balance its "multi-vector

foreign policy" in the face of pressure from Russia and China. Atambayev was confident that his proposed constitutional changes, currently being reviewed by the Constitutional Court, would be adopted ("If there are any delays, I'll organize rallies," he said). He added that approval of funding for Kyrgyzstan's Threshold Country Plan would also provide a needed boost to "our efforts" to promote democratic development.

A Top Priority: Independent Television

¶17. (C) Civil society and opposition leaders asked for greater U.S. support for independent television news, to counter the pro-Russian, anti-American bias of current sources. Civil society and opposition supporter Abdurakhmanov told Boucher that Kyrgyz society was losing in the battle for information because of the near monopoly of Russian television. While newspapers and radio (especially Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's Kyrgyz-language Radio Azattyk) were relatively free and provided balanced information, their reach was limited, and most people relied on television, he said. Sasykbayeva said that when Russian television covered Kyrgyz leaders, it always portrayed them in the context of being against the U.S. or against the base, and this affected public perceptions. While some of the civil society leaders welcomed the decision to turn state broadcaster KTR into "public television," others felt that little would change because parliament and the administration were not likely to approve independent-minded people for the station's board. The civil society leaders felt that the bias in available information was a real threat to democracy in Kyrgyzstan.

¶18. (C) Several independent members of parliament also told

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Boucher that the U.S. was losing the "propaganda battle" in Central Asia. Parliamentarian Omurbek Tekebayev suggested that the recent protests against the air base were "artificial" and stirred by the media, and he thought the U.S. would have to expend "considerable sums" to combat Russian information. Member of Parliament Melis Eshimkanov argued for a U.S.-supported television channel. And even Prime Minister Atambayev asked for help with getting more "independent information" into Kyrgyzstan. He said that even with a change in state television, two channels can't compete with all the channels owned by "foreign entities."

¶19. (C) The Assistant Secretary told his audiences that he had heard their message about the critical need for independent television. Civil society and opposition leaders in Kazakhstan had given him the same message. While television broadcasting for the region would be a very expensive undertaking, Boucher would do whatever he could to find money to help support a project.

The Base: A Challenge for the Relationship

¶10. (C) While Presidential Chief of Staff Sadyrkulov assured Boucher that the government supported the continued presence of the base, the government is looking for ways to increase the economic benefits to Kyrgyzstan from the base. Foreign Minister Karabayev referred to the \$150 million estimated combined value of base compensation, base contracts, and all U.S. assistance programs, and urged that "everything" be implemented "in reality, not just in words." Boucher pointed out that in 2006 the U.S. and Kyrgyzstan renegotiated the base compensation agreement, with a substantial increase in the rents paid for land, and the U.S. is current on all payments under the agreement, but was willing to look at ways to increase local purchases and other economic benefits connected to the base.

¶11. (C) Speaker of Parliament Sultanov also appeared to want to revisit the 2006 agreement on land and facility rents.

Sultanov said that in addition to "rapidly rising land prices" in Kyrgyzstan generally, the close proximity of base facilities was blocking expansion of Manas International Airport buildings and private sector constructions projects, such as an airport hotel. Sultanov remarked that several potential investors and private companies had already complained to his office on the issue. Boucher replied that this is precisely the sort of issue airbase personnel need to be discussing with local Kyrgyz authorities and interested companies, perhaps within the scope of a local joint commission. Boucher added, however, that the Kyrgyz should not expect the U.S. to revisit overall payment levels outlined in the 2006 bilateral agreement.

¶12. (C) In addition to the compensation issue, Sultanov confirmed to Boucher that parliamentary hearings on the base would likely take place in the fall, focusing on issues of ecological damage from jettisoning of fuel and the "diplomatic immunity" of all servicemen under the current base agreement. Parliamentarian Karganbek Samakov added that a majority in parliament was in favor of re-examining current bilateral agreements on the airbase and "revoking" the "diplomatic status" of the airmen. (Note: Sultanov and Samakov were referring to standard language in U.S. status of forces agreements maintaining that U.S. military personnel are subject to U.S. military law and jurisdiction. The distinction between this and actual diplomatic immunity is often confused by senior Kyrgyz officials. End note.)

¶13. (C) Parliamentarians Bolot Maripov and Alisher Sabirov thought the current bilateral relationship would improve with resolution of sensitive issues related to the airbase. Maripov saw three main sticking points: insufficient

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payments to the widow of truck driver Aleksandr Ivanov; a lack of action in response to the September 2006 aircraft collision; and a dearth of available information regarding U.S. payments in connection with the base. Overall, he said, while there had been close U.S.-Kyrgyz cooperation on many issues in the past, the current bilateral relationship was based on too much talk and too little concrete action.

¶14. (C) In each of the meetings, Boucher emphasized that the base was important for stability in Afghanistan and the whole region. He said that the U.S. had acted responsibly in operating the base, negotiating a significant increase in compensation last year and looking for other ways to increase economic benefits from the base. Boucher explained that the U.S. had made a payment to Mrs. Ivanova that was over twenty times her husband's annual salary -- in effect, a lifetime pension paid in a lump sum. He told government officials that the U.S. had authorized a payment for the damaged airplane, but was awaiting a response from the Kyrgyz air company. He acknowledged that these issues should have been resolved more quickly, and he agreed with many interlocutors that the U.S. could do more on providing information to the parliament and the public. Boucher suggested activating the joint commission on the base to address (and resolve more quickly) other issues, such as possible environmental damage, increasing local purchasing for the base, and even expansion plans for the civilian airport.

SCO Summit: Keeping the Base off the Agenda

¶15. (C) Assistant Secretary Boucher urged Kyrgyz officials to keep discussion of the base off the agenda of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit in August in Bishkek. Prime Minister Atambayev said he was concerned about the possibility of a discussion of the base at the summit, and that he hoped the U.S. could do something positive before the summit (such as approve funding for Kyrgyzstan's Threshold Country Plan) to help take pressure off President Bakiyev. Foreign Minister Karabayev said that the U.S. should not worry about discussion of the base at the summit, but focus

instead on "decisions," and any decision would be a "good one." Speaker Sultanov said that he had consistently argued in parliament, to the government, and with the public, that the base was a bilateral issue that should be evaluated solely in terms of Kyrgyzstan's national interest.

Education: Kyrgyzstan as a Regional Center

¶16. (C) On June 9, Assistant Secretary Boucher gave the commencement address to the graduates of the American University of Central Asia. The graduates hailed from throughout Central Asia and Afghanistan. In his speech, as well as in his meetings, Boucher highlighted the USG's commitment to the American University, and he emphasized the important role Kyrgyzstan could play as a center of education in the region.

Comment

¶17. (C) In all of the meetings, the reception for Assistant Secretary Boucher was positive, with Kyrgyz interlocutors

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looking to move past base-related issues and engage on future cooperation. The need for independent television came up in meeting after meeting, with many asking for U.S. support. Prime Minister Atambayev was almost effusive in his description of past cooperation, and he clearly believed that U.S. support was crucial to continued democratic development in Kyrgyzstan. Foreign Minister Karabayev was anxious to follow up on the idea of a broader Comprehensive Policy Dialogue between the two governments, with the first meeting

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possibly taking place in Washington in the fall. Finally, government and civil society representatives expressed strong support for funding Kyrgyzstan's Threshold Country Plan, citing the importance of judicial sector reforms.

¶18. (U) Assistant Secretary Boucher has cleared this message.
YOVANOVITCH